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Gay Rights Advocate Judy Shepard to Address IWU Campus

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Gay rights advocate Judy Shepard, mother of Matthew Shepard, the victim of a hate-crime that lit a fire of public outcry across the country two years ago, now speaks of her grief to make a difference--to prevent hate crimes.

As publicity material also notes, "Shepard is determined to use her grief over her son's death to make a difference--to do what she can to ensure that no other parent will have to endure what she has."

Shepard will present, "The Legacy of Matthew Shepard" on Tuesday, Jan. 23 at 7 p.m. in the Main Lounge of Illinois Wesleyan University's Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University St., Bloomington.

"Judy Shepard's visit to campus will raise awareness that these things happen, and although the murder happened over two years ago halfway across the country, we are still affected by it," said Kosha Baxi, IWU's Student Senate issues and programming commissioner.

While in Saudia Arabia, Shepard and her husband Dennis began to learn of their son's fate in the middle of the night on Oct. 8, 1998. Their son, college-aged Matthew, was in a coma after enduring a brutal attack because he was gay.

After being lured from a Laramie, Wyo., bar, robbed of \$20, tied to a fence, and whipped with a pistol, Matthew was left to die. Five days later, Matthew did die in a Fort Collins, Colo., hospital.

The incident rung an alarm across the country and drew attention to a dire need to abolish the growing epidemic of hate crimes. Thousands of e-mails, letters and vigils held across the country supported the Shepard family in their time of need.

Judy and Dennis Shepard developed the Matthew Shepard Foundation (www.matthewsplace.com) in an effort to carry on their son's legacy by embracing the fight for social justice he had led during his lifetime. Since their initial efforts, Shepard has testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee in support of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. She also has appeared in three Human Rights Campaign public service television spots aimed at edging out anti-gay violence and supporting a better understanding of gay issues.

Shepard also is actively involved with Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). She encourages school administrators to make schools safer for gay students and actively discourages students from harassment.

"One of the reasons why Judy Shepard is a good speaker is because she speaks like a mother. This is something that everyone can relate to, because we all have a mother or are a mother," said Baxi. "She will essentially be connecting with every person in the room."

Shepard has said, "I realize that what I can try and accomplish is to make people aware. We get so complacent in our lives that we forget not everyone is safe, and frequently, it is our children who aren't safe."

"Emotions are the first step to action. If we become passionate about something, it is because we have stepped out of apathy into caring," Baxi said. "I hope there isn't a dry eye in the room that evening."